"Tremendous waves of enthusiasm were surging about him as the Rail-splitter"

MY RECOLLECTIONS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

By Gibson William Harris

A Law Student in Lincoln and Herndon's Office From 1845 to 1847

EDITOR'S NOTE—Breaking the silence of more than fifty years, Mr. Harris has consented to furnish the Woman's Home Companion a series of personal reminiscences that will be found decidedly unique, the writer's viewpoint having the advantage of absolute novelty. They cover a period of the great Emancipator's life with which, notwithstanding the amount of Lincoln literature already printed, the most of readers are little familiar. The series will comprise four articles, of which this is the introductory one. The author of these papers, a lineal descendant of Elder William Brewster, of "Mayflower" fame, since 1883 has resided at Holly Hill, Florida. The second instalment of these Recollections, to appear in the December number, will describe Mr. Lincoln's office habits and personal traits, and give an account of his successful candidacy, in 1846, for a seat in the Thirtieth Congress. During this campaign Mr. Harris acted as Lincoln's confidential clerk and amanuensis.

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He Shared the Common Lot

ABRAHAM LINCOLN, when I knew him, seldom spoke of his early life unless questioned about it. His biographers delight to remind us he was never ashamed of his lowly origin, but of the fact that he never assumed superiority because of the height to which he finally rose above it, they have made small account.

Yet here his native greatness, founded on a rarely balanced self-judgment and true humility, was strikingly displayed. He had ambitions, and high ones, but he never sought their attainment through self-glorification or other cheap-john methods so readily occurring to men of common mold. In the family of

GIBSON WILLIAM HARRIS
Author of "My Recollections of Abraham Lincoln"

the pioneer, poverty and privation were the common lot, and childhood had no exemption. No one better understood this than Abraham Lincoln. He disdained to warp the hard and narrow life he had shared with a million, more or less, of other young men into a claim of special merit for himself. It is true that, years after my intimacy with Mr. Lincoln as his law clerk and amanuensis, tremendous waves of enthusiasm were surging about him as the Rail-splitter. But it was not his behest that put them in motion. The rail-carrying in the extraordinary campaigns of 1858 and 1860 was the happy thought of politicians overjoyed to have something so concrete, so object-teaching, around which to rally the toiling masses of the North.

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We Were Poor and Happy Boys

The Lincoln family was living near Gentryville, in Spencer County, Indiana, and Abraham was still in his teens, when I first saw the light at Albion, in Edwards County, Illinois. The two localities are sixty miles apart. In 1830, the year in which the future Emancipator came of age, his father removed to Illinois, and the family again settled about sixty miles from Albion, this time to the north of it, instead of east as formerly. Familiar with their surroundings in both states, and especially so with those in Indiana, through repeated visits to relatives living at no great distance from Gentryville, I feel safe in saying the young people in Thomas Lincoln's household passed through very much the same experiences that we children did in my boyhood home. Abraham Lincoln and I did not know that we were poor, and we were happy boys.

It is well-nigh impossible for the first quarter of the twentieth century to understand the first quarter of the nineteenth, because there is lacking a common standard, or set of standards rather, for the two epochs. The make-up of human nature remains the same, but within eighty, and even within sixty, years the externals of American life have changed enormously. When Lincoln and I were boys there were no millionaires west of the Allegheny Mountains, and only three in the United States. There were no railroads, no telegraphs, no telephones, no sun-pictures. The only means of artificial light, other than the blazing logs in the chimney-back, were tallow candles, and the melted fat of various animals stored in shallow vessels and having a cotton rag thrust into it for a wick. Matches to light our wood-fires, our candles or our lamps there were none. When these light-dispensers went out, or were put out, and it came to kindling them anew, resort was had to a flint, a piece of steel of some kind and a little tinder, three requisites that every family aimed to have always on hand. Sometimes the powder bought for our flint-lock guns had to take the tinder's place, unless a neighbor's kindness could be turned to account in begging a few live embers, which would be hurried home bedded in some ashes in the bottom of a pan. This emergency errand, we may be sure, was a familiar one to the boy Abraham Lincoln.

Log-Cabin Life

This was the era of the pioneers. The backwoodsmen had nearly all gone further west, and with them had disappeared buckskin suits and moccasins. But in winter, town and country boys alike affected a preference still for the once invariable fur cap, home-made from the skin of the otter, mink, coon or some similar animal. The women and girls all wore bonnets (hats were a later innovation), sunbonnets ruling half the year. Powder, shot, lead and tobacco were prime necessities in every home.

The pioneer mothers, many of them, were famous cooks. All used a long-handled frying-pan, iron skillet, and iron oven with iron lids. Tea-kettles and pots were likewise all of iron. In the pots were boiled such meats as were not reserved for baking in the iron oven or roasting at the fire. Our food was of the best. Game abounded; for the shooting or trapping a family could enjoy all it wished of venison, bear meat, wild turkeys, partridges, prairie-chickens, quail, rabbits and squirrels. In addition we had home-grown beef, mutton and pork in plenty. Every house had a vegetable garden, larger or smaller, at the rear or off to one side. Bread from wheat-flour was customarily at the command of whoever fancied it, but the great majority liked corn-bread better. Roasting-ears lasted throughout a season of several weeks, hominy the year round. The fruits and nuts to be had for simply gathering them included wild strawberries (sweeter and more luscious than any cultivated variety I ever tasted), blackberries, plums and grapes, walnuts, pecans, and hickory, hazel and beech nuts. Home-made drinks were much in vogue, especially wild-grape, elderberry and blackberry wines, and a delicious mead made with honey. Plates, cups without handles and saucers were almost invariably of common earthenware. Our steel knives were paired

THE EARLIEST PORTRAIT OF LINCOLN
From a daguerreotype taken in 1846 by N. H. Shephard, a roommate of the author of these Recollections, who says in a private letter: "The negative has evidently been highly touched up, and the wart on Mr. Lincoln's cheek, as also the wrinkles, been removed. The result is a face quite too youthful, but aside from this it is a good likeness of Abraham Lincoln as he was in the middle 40's."

with two-tined steel forks; a table set with three-tined forks invited criticism as aping aristocracy.

No one ever thought of any other material for them than loose straw or shredded corn-husks, except as the thrifty housewife topped them, when winter came, with a bed of feathers. Clothing, home-made and commonly of jeans (which Abraham Lincoln habitually wore up to within two years of his marriage), was adapted to the varying seasons, and amply warm in winter. The stores were stocked with powder, shot and lead, besides the miscellany one finds in country "general stores" to-day. They nearly all sold liquors.

"This emergency errand was a familiar one to the boy Abraham Lincoln"

Schoolmasters and Books

Schools were few and far between in the settlements that dotted, more numerously each year, the new states of Indiana and Illinois. In our village the masters, as they were known by a perpetuated English usage, were rather better educated than, from all accounts, they had been in Lincoln's experience. Some were men of marked ability and force of character. My first teacher, A. C. French, in later life served two terms as governor of Illinois, while another, the one who loaned his copy of Byron to Abraham Lincoln under circumstances soon to be recited, was a highly educated Englishman, a portrait-painter of genuine talent, who had come to America and sought a home on the ont-skirts of civilization in order to gratify his passion for hunting. He lived in the forest or on the prairie when not in the school-room; his wife often joined in his outings, for she, too, was an excellent shot.

Books were few, compared with their present bewildering profusion, but they were to be had. If one could not buy, he could readily borrow, and as, in addition, it was customary, in most families, to subscribe for at least one weekly newspaper, mental pabulum was by no means lacking.

The Boy Abraham Lincoln

Amid environments such as I have attempted to describe—rude, but not nearly so barren as they have commonly been represented—Abraham Lincoln grew to manhood. He could and did perform physical labor. He felled trees, chopped cord-wood and split rails, storing his mind the while with a wealth of forest lore that gave him pleasure to the end of his life. He plowed the fields and sowed them with grain, and when the time came he helped to gather the harvest. But he never took to the routine drudgery of farm life. While a sense of duty made him a faithful "hand," physical labor was distasteful to the strapping youth, nor, in truth, did it grow less so with the years.

He had tasted of the Pierian spring, and resolved to drink more deeply. Naturally, in times when strength of body and physical endurance passed as the highest of endowments, people thought of them first. Lincoln, large, lithe and sinewy, became the champion on whom his associates relied to meet and defeat any boastful wrestler who chanced to come along. It is noteworthy that he rarely, if ever, volunteered for such bouts, being simply pressed into the service by friends. From a lad his ambition had been reaching out in far other directions. In the *debating clubs* of his boy associates he was an acknowledged and willing leader.

Books he craved with a longing that never flagged. Books he borrowed from acquaintances near and far. At Rockport, the county-seat of Spencer County, Indiana (then a bustling and ambitious shipping-point on the Ohio River), lived Judge Pitcher, who was the enviable possessor of what passed in those days for an ample library, without counting its goodly number of law-books. Like every one else who knew young Lincoln, the Judge took a fancy to him, and allowed him to borrow almost at will from the library shelves.

Pivotal Years in Lincoln's Life

Thus it came about that when Lincoln, at the age of twenty-one, accompanied his father's family to Illinois, the self-tutored youth had already gained more than a smattering of the principles of common law. Already, too, he was feeling his way in the political field. Two years later—in 1832—after his captaincy of a company of volunteers in the Black Hawk War, he was an unsuccessful candidate for representative in the Illinois legislature. At the end of another two years he renewed his candidacy, and this time he was elected. Having now struck a road to his liking, he was beginning to travel it with a firm step.

He took up the law as a means of livelihood, but his heart was in politics. Not the paltry play of mingled selfishness and sycophancy which the sadly degraded word so often synonymizes in this day, but, predominantly, politics as "the science and the art of government; in other words, the theory and practice of obtaining the ends of civil society as perfectly as possible." In this finer sense politics was Lincoln's native element. He delighted, he reveled in it, as a fish does in water, as a bird disports itself on the sustaining air. And it was politics which in due time circled his still enlarging orbit within the range of my boyish ken.

The First Time I Saw Abraham Lincoln

The presidential campaign of 1840 was in full blast, the famous campaign of "Tippecanoe and Tyler, too."

MADE BY LINCOLN WHEN A YOUNG MAN

This ox-yoke is in the possession of the University of Illinois (Champaign, Illinois). It is kept in an oak cabinet in the rotunda of the Library Building.

Abraham Lincoln was on the Whig ticket as a district presidential elector, and for the fourth time was elected that year to the state legislature. The Democratic nominee for presidential elector for the same district was Isaac Walker, an able man, who afterward removed to Iowa, and from that state went to the United States Senate. Both nominees were actively stumping a considerable part of Illinois, and at Albion, on a certain afternoon in mid-autumn, they were to hold a joint debate. Mr. Walker in his early days had lived in our village, and Lincoln, who had the opening speech, was naturally desirous of circumventing what he felt sure would be his opponent's endeavor to make capital of the fact. The opening lines of Byron's "Lara" occurred to him as suitable for his purpose, but he could recall only a portion of them. So, about the middle of the forenoon on the day of the debate, there came into the log school-house, where I sat among other pupils in their early teens, a remarkably tall young man, ungainly and plain-appearing, dressed in a full suit of blue jeans. Approaching the master, he gave his name, apologized for the intrusion, and said: "I am told you have a copy of Byron's works. If you could oblige me, I would like to borrow it for a few hours." But the book was at the master's house, and would have to be sent for. It so happened that the teacher's wife was present, the Diana before referred to, and she offered to fetch it. The distance being considerable, the visitor demurred to her return on this sole errand, and insisted on going with her. With thanks and a good-day to the master, and a smile such as I have never seen on any other face, a smile that was flashed over the room to take in all of us lads and lassies, the tall, gaunt presence passed out.

Lincoln's Tilt That Afternoon With Isaac Walker

We boys had previously given little thought to the political meeting, but there was something about the visitor that aroused in me, as I found it had in my chums, a strong desire to see him again and hear him speak. Several of us petitioned for and were granted a half-holiday. Mr. Lincoln was at this time thirty-one years old, and had begun to attract attention as a lawyer. His style of speaking even then was remarkably direct and forcible. At the meeting in question almost the first thing we heard, when the debate opened, were these lines:

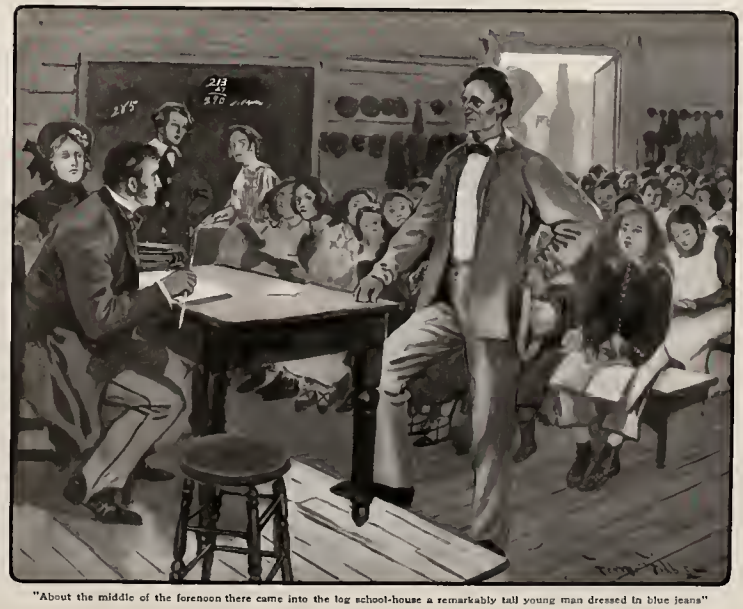
"He, their unhoped but unforgotten lord,
The long self-exiled chieftain, is restored;
There be bright faces in the busy hall,
Bowls on the board, and banners on the wall.
He comes at last, in sudden loneliness,
And whence they know not, why they need not guess;
They more might marvel, when the greetings o'er,
Not that he came, but *why came not before.*"

In vain did Mr. Walker's rejoinder ring the changes on auld lang syne. Lincoln's sallies on "why came not before" had taken the wind out of his opponent's sails completely, while his command of pure, sententious English and the correctness of his diction were, I distinctly remember, favorably commented on by some of our best citizens. Albion's large proportion of educated men gave this appraisal real significance.

A Week of Waiting and a New Friend

In September, 1845, through the kindness of our then state senator, Mr. Charles Constable, it was arranged that I should enter the law office of Lincoln and Herndon, at Springfield, as student and clerk. From Albion it took me three days to reach Springfield by stage, the only means of transportation available other than private conveyance, though the distance can now be covered by rail in four hours. Repairing to the law-firm's office, I met Mr. Herndon, and learned from him that the senior partner was traveling the circuit, and would not be home for several days. I left without disclosing my identity, preferring to await the return of Mr. Lincoln.

Early in the tedious days that followed, I made the acquaintance at the hotel of a young man from Syracuse, New York, named N. H. Shephard, a daguerreotypist who was about opening a gallery in Springfield. Photographs were as yet unknown, and dagnerreotyping was considered, as it actually was, a marvelous advance in the art of portraiture.

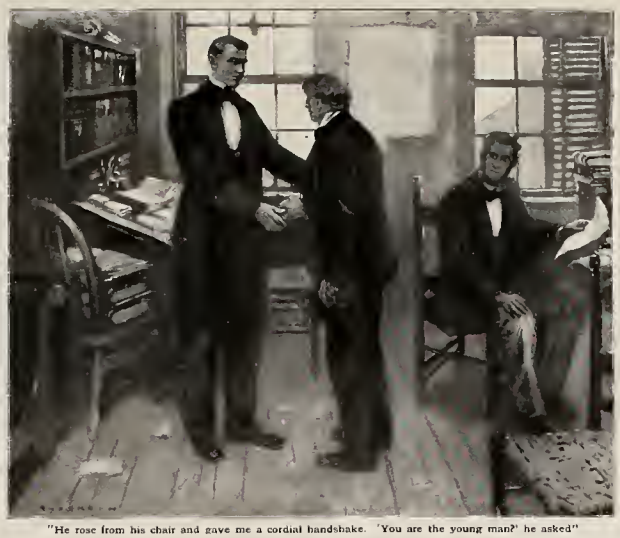


"About the middle of the forenoon there came into the log school-house a remarkably tall young man dressed in blue jeans"

Together we two, Shephard and I, looked up a boarding-place, where we became room-mates, remaining such throughout my stay in Springfield. He was among the very first in his line to come as far west as Illinois, and we were warm friends to the end. In the latter part of 1848 he wrote me (at Albion) that he was about to start for California, and promised to write again in a few weeks or months; but further word never came from him, and I have always believed that, like so many others, he was lost on the overland trail.

In one of Miss Tarbell's Lincoln articles, published a few years ago in a current magazine, I noticed a portrait of Lincoln with the statement annexed that it was from a daguerreotype, but giving the reader to understand that it could not be ascertained when and by whom the likeness was taken. Later, the same portrait appeared in the *Century Magazine*, but still unidentified. I feel confident I am not mistaken in recognizing the portrait as the work of my friend Shephard, before whose camera I know Mr. Lincoln sat once or oftener. The claim repeatedly made for it of being the earliest portrait of Abraham Lincoln remains, as far as I know, an undisputed fact.

Learning in due time that Mr. Lincoln had returned, I again went to the law office, and this time he was in. He rose from his chair and gave me a cordial handshake.



"He rose from his chair and gave me a cordial handshake. 'You are the young man?' he asked"

My Installation in Lincoln's Office

"You are the young man Mr Constable spoke to me about?" he asked, and then introduced me to Mr. Herndon. Next, motioning toward the office bookcase, he remarked, "You will need what that contains. Make yourself at home," which I proceeded to do by taking a chair, he resuming his at the same time. El-

MRS. ABRAHAM LINCOLN IN 1845

evating his feet to a level with his head, literally sitting on his backbone, he began making inquiries about different persons in and around Albion. The extent of his acquaintance with them surprised me, but the surprise wore off when I found, as I did in time, there was not a county in Illinois in which he did not know a number of the leading citizens, men whose voice had weight in public affairs. He seemed not only to know just how much influence each had politically, but likewise their noted peculiarities, their whims and fancies.

I did no reading that day. Mr. Lincoln was taking a rest after his tour of the circuit, and was in a chatty mood; above all, I was a new subject for his mental apparatus to investigate. If any mind was ever governed in its activities by the maxim, "The proper study of mankind is man," it was Abraham Lincoln's. During my stay in his office I was the only student and only clerk in it. I can truthfully say I gave to my duties of both kinds the most diligent attention of which I was capable, and was soon made to feel the senior partner's kindly interest in me personally. Simultaneously the less pleasing fact dawned upon me that Mr. Lincoln was not an assiduous instructor in the technics of law (which, indeed, were always more or less irksome to him, his mind dwelling rather on its principles), and reluctantly I began to turn to Mr. Herndon for such explanations as I needed, or, as opportunity offered, discussed what to me were knotty points with various younger members of the local bar. But, while these developments could not but be a damper to the ardent youth unsatisfied till he could enter Mr. Lincoln's office, I never thought of admiring him less.

The Personality of Mrs. Lincoln

When I came into his office, Mr Lincoln had been married about three years, having won the hand of Mary Todd, a reigning belle, in rivalry, as was said, with Stephen A. Douglas. Their wedding took place on November 4, 1842. As a frequent visitor I was made welcome at the Lincoln home, and on two different occasions, at the instance of Mr. Lincoln, he being unable to attend, I became Mrs. Lincoln's escort to a ball, where I danced with her. I always found her most pleasant-mannered. She was a bright, witty and accomplished young woman, naturally fond of fun and frolic, but very staid and proper when it was in order to be so. I was impressed with her brilliant conversational powers, and the superior education she constantly evinced. She spoke French with the same fluency as her mother-tongue. Her sportive title for me, in familiar converse, was "Mr. Mister," while Mr. Lincoln always addressed me by my first name.

The duel (that never came off) between Lincoln and General Shields, on the future Mrs. Lincoln's account, was never referred to in my hearing, either at the office or elsewhere, during my whole stay in Springfield. Not even Mr. Lincoln's second, Doctor Merriman, once mentioned it, though I became well acquainted with him through a close intimacy with his son, before the latter enlisted in the Mexican War.

Mrs. Lincoln never visited the office. She was a member of the First Presbyterian Church, which early in 1903 celebrated the seventy-fifth anniversary of its organization, bringing out, among other reminiscences, Mr. Lincoln's promptness in paying pew rent. The statement that he attended the church on nearly or quite three fourths of the Sundays he was in Springfield may have been true of later years, but to predicate it of the middle 40's would be an exaggeration.

Mr. Lincoln's Consideration for His Wife

Mr. Lincoln showed great consideration for his wife, which I noticed the more, perhaps, because, for some reason, Mr. Herndon cherished a strong dislike for her, and of this fact made no secret to the office-clerk. She was unusually timid and nervous during a thunder-storm, and whenever one threatened, her husband made it a point to leave whatever he was engaged upon, if it was a possible thing, and go home, to stay with her until it passed over. When called to Chicago, to be gone several days, he nearly always took her with him. If there was no love between them, as the world has been so persistently exhorted to believe, I must say they had a strange way of showing it, a way that hoodwinked me completely.

All that I saw or knew of them leads me to accept as entirely authentic the favorite tradition that when the dispatch announcing his nomination for the presidency was handed to Mr. Lincoln in the Illinois State House, he folded it up, with the quiet remark, "There is a little woman down on Eighth Street who will be glad to see this; I must take it to her."

Equally in keeping with my impressions is the pathetic account of their last drive together, in the course of which Mr. Lincoln said: "Mary, we have had a hard time of it since we came to Washington; but the war is over, and with God's blessing we may look for four years of peace and happiness, and then we will go back to Illinois and pass the rest of our lives in quiet." Eleven hours later came the assassination.

Lincoln as Senior Partner

Twice a year Mr. Lincoln followed the itinerary of the Circuit Court in his district, and frequently in adjoining districts, also. Springfield, being the state capital, was exclusively honored with the sessions of the Supreme Court, then composed of the nine Circuit Judges, and when this august body was sitting he attended its sessions almost daily. So long as these various courts were grinding, the law-firm's student was left to his own resources in mastering the details of the profession, with practically no variation of thought or interest except the tiresome duty of copying abstracts of cases, to be used in the Supreme Court, one abstract for each of the nine judges.

Mr. Herndon was a young lawyer of some repute for care and painstaking in office-work when Mr. Lincoln took him into partnership, and it was he who drew up the pleas and other papers to be used in the District Court, the senior partner's share being to do

"'He looked so comical,' said Mr. Lincoln"

the talking. When, however, a case reached the Supreme Court, the required abstract was invariably drafted by Mr. Lincoln. These abstracts were models of condensation, and even the law-clerk's untrained mind was impressed with their clearness and grasp.

Mr. Lincoln's courtesy to young practitioners was little less than proverbial, and it was never more gracious than when he was the opposing counsel. He had a happy knack of setting them at ease and encouraging them to put forth their best efforts. In consequence they all liked him.

LINCOLN'S SADDLE-BAGS AND OFFICE TABLE IN 1846
The rocking-chair, according to Mr. Harris, was a luxury that came later

An Adventure of Master Bob's

Mr. Lincoln sometimes told at the office the sayings or doings of his children. One such account I remember as well as if I had heard it last week. He came in, an hour or so after dinner, smiling beyond even his wont, and said he was lying down at home, having left his boots in the second-story hallway, when all at once he heard a tremendous clatter on the stairs. He jumped up, hurried to the head of the stairs, and looking down, saw Bob (Robert Todd Lincoln, aged three) getting up on all fours from the floor of the hallway below, unhurt but sadly bewildered. "The youngster had got into my boots," he said, "and in trying to walk around in them had fallen down-stairs. You ought to have seen him, Gibson—he looked *so* comical with the boot-legs reaching clear up to his little body." He laughed heartily, and more than once during the afternoon he broke out in laughter again, as the incident kept coming to his mind afresh.